

Oral History Project: Our Story, Our Time

The Hampton History Museum is implementing a large, community project called Our Story, Our Time. The new initiative will focus on celebrating those stories in each of us that illuminate who we are as a community. The ultimate goal of the project is to create a collection of oral histories – by searching out and recording stories. In conjunction to this work taking place on a weekly basis, a series of community events will be the public face of these efforts and help focus attention on finding and preserving records and first-person accounts that tell the story of Hampton and the large Hampton Roads Community.

So how will we accomplish this? ...By actually listening to you, your parents or grandparents. In doing so, we not only understand how people experienced particular events, but we also help build a larger understanding of how people create meaning and how people influence and are influenced by events. If you think about dates and names as the foundation of history, think of oral histories as the context. Capturing oral histories provides the context so we can make intellectual, emotional, and personal connections between historic events and decisions made by ordinary people, like you and me.

Oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony as well as the product and process. Oral history interviews are historical documents that are preserved and made accessible to future researchers and members of the public. Oral history isn't just a different way of gathering information about history. It's also a different way of gathering information about *memory* itself. Truth is important, but so is the *subjectivity* of how events are remembered. Allesandro Portelli, an Italian historian has said that "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did."

History is more than a list of names and dates and should include the stories of people living what most would consider "ordinary" lives and no longer be about nameless ranks marching through events set in motion by other people.

Why is Oral History So Important?

1. Oral history provides depth, texture, and nuance. It **fills in gaps**.
2. Oral histories gives **voice to otherwise hidden or voiceless people** - such as those who are illiterate, or live on the edge of our society.
3. This project truly **embraces the ideals of democracy** –oral and public history has the capacity to redefine and redistribute who is telling the story, so that history's **authorship** might be shared rather than serve as an instrument of power or hierarchy.
4. Oral history can bring to light hidden aspects of a story, **facilitating a sense of closure** to issues not adequately dealt with by our community.
5. Oral history can provide an older generation with **a way of connecting** to the younger
6. Oral history can help us recover forgotten knowledge. And, ultimately, oral histories can **substantiates or potentially corrects the official record**.